FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS

April 20, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"He said to him...'Do you love me?' Peter...said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"
--John 21:17 (RSV)

Scripture
John 21:1-17

It comes down to the man, doesn't it? At some point, out of all the people in history, he has laid a claim on us. It may have been an individual emotional upheaval, and it may have been an intellectual itch we tried to scratch for two decades. It may have been a fire in our viscera about human rights and the dignity of all human beings, and it may have been a sense of inadequacy or guilt or disgust at personal weakness that resisted resolution, or it may have been a profound desire to affirm the beauty of the world and the goodness of life and the love deep within us. Somehow, he was and is in the middle of it. Somehow he is getting to us.

The religious book which garnered most of the attention this season was Jesus Through the Centuries, His Place in the History of Culture, by Jaroslav Pelikan, a Theologian at Yale. It is a strenuous book which traces the enormous impact Jesus of Nazareth has had on culture. Even when the institutions of religion seem to sag, the man continues to compel. Pelikan begins his work with this provocative thought:

"If it were possible, with some sort of super-magnet, to pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray." [p.1]

It all comes down to this man, doesn't it?

Across the centuries people have been fascinated, almost compelled, sometimes obsessed with him - believers and unbelievers. Art, literature, music have celebrated him. He has been a friend of counter culture: has offered a "hand to put your hand into"...has been a Superstar on Broadway, a Bridge over troubled waters, and has continued to speak to high culture in Magnificat, Passion, Mass and Messiah. He has gathered up aspirations, expressed deep love, and been the rallying point for the anger of communities as diverse as the human race. He is at the center of

liberation movements from solidarity in Poland to Bishop Tutu's Council of Churches in South Africa. He was in Chinese House Churches for several decades and he is at the center of base communities in Central America today. He has comforted the pious and somehow managed to speak to the irreverent as well.

There are choices to be made about how best to express it: from J. S. Bach to the simplest Sunday School song; from the elegance of the Cathedral on Sunday, to taking the Sacrament to the patients in the geriatric wing; from the breathtaking selflessness of Mother Teresa, to the decision not to cheat on a final exam. But at the center is the man. And those of us who prefer our Gospel in complex sentences, encased in words like "empirical" and "existential" need the occasional reminder.

I was reminded of that at a seminar on the relationship of the Gospel to the life of the nation. I found myself deeply troubled by the complexity of our economic situation, pulled - as we all are - between concern for the poor and the need for a viable and responsible national economy. The topic invites passion and the leadership of the workshop was understandably partisan and sometimes angry. It was not easy going for anyone and it certainly wasn't pietistic in the usual sense of that word. The name "Jesus Christ" was invoked a lot and not always in prayer. On the last evening the leadership team assembled as a panel to discuss the matter of how individuals who care about justice and rights and also about an effective and and productive economy in this complex environment find that their own souls are fed. I was startled to hear one of the leaders - a strong, creative woman from New York City, deeply committed to social justice and social change - answer "I am fed by my personal relationship with Jesus Christ." It was a magnificent reminder that regardless of where we are ecclesiastically: - High Church Anglican to Free Will Baptist and all points between; or politically - liberal to conservative; regardless of anything else, at the center is the man, and our coming to terms with him.

I found another reminder in a Seminary Commencement Address Chicago Theologian Joseph Sittler delivered - under the title: The Haunting Allure of Jesus. Now Joe Sittler is a wonderful human being and a great theologian and his language skills are legendary. I read whatever he writes. So I read eagerly what Sittler had to say to new seminary graduates. He posed the question of how Christianity gets transmitted from one person to another one generation to the next. Listen to how he put it - "As I tried to discern the tangled history of my own coming to Christian faith...My whole life has been haunted by the reality of Jesus...I find that, despite all the scholarship which has taken place between my seminary days and this moment, there is no abatement in the power of this haunting allure of the figure of Jesus." [Trinity Review, Fall 1982, p. 34]

Sittler told how he had been on a program with Krister Stendahl, one of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, now a Scandanavian Bishop, and how a layman from Iowa had gotten up during the question and answer period and asked very simply, "Professor Stendahl, how did you get 'hooked' on this stuff?" Sittler said: "Now we all leaned back and expected from Stendal a fairly long-haired description of the historical, conceptual, philosophical path by which many of us came, and it was a great

moment when Stendahl said, 'My family and I were not church people at all and the only way I could rebel against the mores of my family was to go to church! And when I got to church, within six months, I fell in love with Jesus.'" [p.p. 33, 34]

Even those intellectuals who perceive and discern and comprehend so much more than the rest of us begin here, with the elemental simplicity of the man. Or perhaps it is because they discern so much that they can see the centrality of Jesus, the man from Nazareth... "I fell in love with Jesus."

The question is posed first by Jesus himself. "Do you love me Peter?" It is found in the Gospel lesson for the day.

On the night Jesus was arrested and subjected to the humiliation of a phony religious trial before Caiaphas, Peter had followed at a safe distance into the courtyard of the high priest's residence. It was there, warming himself at the fire, that Peter had been challenged. "You are one of them!" a young woman had said. And Peter, startled, friehtened, had denied it. Three times it happened that night and each time Peter denied knowing Jesus, punctuating his third denial with an obscenity. It is one of the more poignantly human stories in the Gospel narrative, and it concludes powerfully with the cock crowing and Jesus' eyes meeting Peter's and Peter weeping bitterly, devastated by his own humanness.

What occurred next, for Peter, is unclear. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. If the disciples were around, most of them at least, kept a discreet distance. On the first day of the week, Peter was one of the first to discover the empty tomb. And then there occurred a series of mysterious resurrection appearances. Some time later Peter and the others are fishing in the early morning when the risen Christ appears on the shore. They eat breakfast together and the stage is set for the conclusion of the matter of Peter's denial.

As Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, now Jesus asks him three times, "Simon Peter, do you love me? And as he denied Jesus three times now Peter professes his love, with the same increasing intensity. And three times Jesus adds the admonition: "Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep..."

There are at least two dynamics happening in this intense interchange. The first has to do with the power of Jesus' love for Peter. The second is about the demand, the response. Surely, after the crucifixion, following his own terrible cowardice, Peter was virtually a prisoner of his own guilt. We know a little bit about our vulnerability and culpability here. We know what it means to set high goals and espouse noble ideals, to plan to be brave and courageous and strong, and then head for cover as soon as the going gets tough. We know what it feels like to fail to live up to our own expectations of ourselves and the guilt which results. We can, that is to say, sense more than a little of the self-inflicted remorse Peter was experiencing after the crucifixion.

"Do you love me, Peter?" What was he supposed to say to that? The truth of the matter was that he had not behaved in a way which expressed

love for anyone or anything but his own life. Yet, he did love Jesus. How very human this internal polarity is. He knew what he had done and he knew the intensity of his own soul. He loved Jesus as he had never loved anything before. And so the first dynamic here has to do with Peter, even in the midst of the pain and guilt and remorse of the moment, hearing and experiencing the steady love of Jesus for him. Jesus somehow could love people who don't appear to have done much to deserve that love. Jesus somehow could discern that which is lovable in even the most unlovable characters. Because Jesus stayed with him, even as he was backing down; because Jesus was faithful, even when he wasn't, Peter could begin to see something of value in himself, could - in the words of one commentator - "love what Jesus loved in him."

That's the first dynamic. And when it happens - when in the midst of our sense of our humanity at its most human - our failures, foibles, our self serving posturing, we know ourselves loved by another, it is like the salvation the prophet compared to the gentle, refreshing rain of God pouring out of the heavens. It's no wonder Peter was in love with Jesus.

The second dynamic also is about falling in love. It, too, is compelling, but in a very different way. What Jesus was asking of Peter now was strength, courage, loyalty. Jesus' love was not an abstraction. His love - and this is so difficult for us to understand - was not an emotion. It was a lifestyle of helping, serving, healing, feeding, liberating. The dialogue between Peter and Jesus does not conclude with a mushy verbal affirmation of affectionate love, but with the behavioral admonition, "Feed my sheep." Which is to say that the way one goes about loving Jesus is by helping with the sheep.

Hans Kung somewhere quips that the list of great people who love Jesus but want nothing to do with the church would be long and distinguished indeed. And everyone on it has missed the point. You can't love Jesus without feeding the sheep, and that gets you mixed up with other folk and before you know it you're in church.

Now no one possessed of common sense, or even a bit of sanity, is going to defend the perfection or purity of the church. In fact, on the topic of the church I've always thought the statement was adequate, albeit a little earthly, that - like the ark - the conditions inside are intolerable until you consider what's going on outside.

Everyone possessed of an ounce of thoughtfulness knows the frailities and human failings of the church. Reflective church people - all - have a lovers quarrel with their own church. In an excellent new book, William Willimon, at Duke University, rehearses all the judgments people make about the church, along the way quoting the romantic poet Southey to the effect that "I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the Church." [p. 3] But then Willimon comes to an insight which I believe is the nub of the matter. Theologically, we have always been troubled by the incarnation - the worldliness of God's love revealed in the life of a man like us. It is a "scandal of particularity" compared, say, to the safe and otherworldly abstractions of Greek religion. So, Willimon says, with the church. It is "scandalously visible." It is full of people. Worse yet, it is full of people we might not necessarily chose to

like. In C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters, Satan counsels his lieutenant on the matter of fighting for the soul of a new Christian. "You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors," he says. "Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'The Body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew."

You can't love Jesus without loving the sheep. Even as Jesus was pulling it out of him I believe Peter was recalling all those instances when love became visible, tangible, physical: when Jesus, moved by compassion had healed his own mother-in-law; when he gently touched little children; and ate with unclean street people; and in hot anger overturned tables and drove moneychangers from the temple; and when in awful majesty - at the end knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet.

I see in Peter my own attraction to the power of that kind of love. The allure has always been a love which has integrity and authenticity and strength about it. But there is a sense in which that strength also repels.

After all, falling in love is very risky business. To be in love with one person is to love humanity more: it is to experience more, sense more, care more and hurt more. If you do not want that, if you do not want your life changed, to love and feel and live more, it is better not to get close to Jesus.

He defines our humanity better than anybody else. Better than anyone he shows us what human life can be and therefore what our own potential is.

The allure of Jesus is that to think about it much is to know that his life is how God planned human life to be lived. Is there really any question any longer that he is the only person in history who understands how to live in peace? Is there any real question that until we learn of him to live together as brothers and sisters across all the lines of nation, class, race, and religion - there will be no peace? Is there any question but that he weeps again - over Jerusalem - and Tripoli and Washington and that he would have his followers at least be able to do that? Is there any question about his position when our frustration and rage at terrorism erupt in new terrorism? Is there any question about where he would be in our world and where his strong love would take him and how he would respond to the irony of a culture in which we who are comfortable are enjoying tax cuts and the enormous generosity of the market, and those who have nothing experience reductions in public assistance for food, shelter, health care; education? Can we, without a very creative denial, stay close to him as money is literally taken away from the poor to purchase a new generation of nuclear technology?

The dangerous allure of Jesus is that he said the truth and had the courage to tell the truth and live the truth. And in so doing he got himself crucified but also became a model of human life lived so fully that anyone who takes the time to learn about it and think about it will be forever haunted by it.

He was, Hans Kung wrote, the "true revolutionary." "What could be more revolutionary," the great theologian asks, than "love of enemies instead of destruction: unconditional forgiveness instead of retaliation;